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DE GRUYTER

istence may have – be it Word or be it Spirit. This approach has to face a danger towards history. In knowing who God is – or in pretending to know who God is – one is tempted to use the power revealed to dominate others in history. There is a long tradition of a fatal coalition between imperial thinking and religious knowledge of God. Fundamentalism with a clear political agenda is the latest example. Here language is simply a vehicle to get access to God. It is not the place to meet him but a place for transmission of power from God to one's own plans with history. Utopia fits very well in this setting and it is easy to create a utopian word and a utopian spirit.

In the divine "where-identity" there is almost no chance to identify God positively. Places where he reveals what he is all about have a heterotopian quality. The more he reveals about his own existence the more heterotopian these places turn out to be. Only two examples: In Exodus 3 Moses has to go to Egypt after getting to know the name God has revealed to him. Moses got a word which is against his spirit because Egypt is the last place Moses feels comfortable with. He has good reasons to escape from it and not return. All his utopias have fallen apart in Egypt and the upcoming Exodus will provide him with the same experience. The very knowledge who Jesus really is, the Son of God, comes to the mind of the Roman centurion under the cross when Jesus is dying (Mark 15:39). Jesus' disciples have fled the place. They have a spirit which keeps them away from hearing the Word. A Jesus dying at a Roman Cross doesn't fit into their ideas about a powerful history with God.

At such heterotopian places one has to overcome ideas of God and projects with his presence which give power to those who stick to their truth-claims. This is a negative identification of what one has to pass over in terms of God. At heterotopias with God a creative transformation can take place and that what is overwhelmed by speechlessness comes to terms with identifications of God which never came up before. One is left without words for what God is or who God is. Such a being without words is a heterotopian experience in language itself. At this place one meets the Spirit as the Word for having no words of God. Here, this Word for having no words becomes the very Word of God. This Word is the topos where an experience of the Spirit waits.

Between the confrontation of the human subject with God's Word as the Lord's Spirit there is a third reality – the heterotopian place of having no words good enough for the experience to transcend oneself. This thirdness is a *locus theologicus alienus*. It has a historical quality of being turned around in one's own identity and a linguistic character of speechlessness. It is the very place of theology in God talk. Here theology means to be sure of not having words good enough for God but knowing that this having no words is the Word where God comes to be known.

Lieven Boeve

4 Theological Truth, Difference and Plurality: Perspectives from a Contextual European Theology of Interruption

From within a European theological perspective, the way in which theological truth claims are to be dealt with today has changed considerably over the last few decades, and, for the most part, is due to the following developments.

Firstly, there is the changed European religious situation, which can be analysed in terms of being both post-Christian and post-secular. This has resulted in the need to reassess the position of the Christian faith, as well as its attempts to deal with the changes. These approaches vary from deploying very defensive and protective strategies up to the uncritical embracing of the new situation as a new era of religion.[1]

Secondly, the postmodern criticism of master narratives, first of all criticising modern ideologies but also having an impact upon religious narratives, has heightened sensitivity for plurality, difference, conflict and otherness. Indeed, in Christian theological circles, this criticism, along with its heightened sensibilities, has lead to reflections on theology's own mechanisms of inclusion or exclusion, turning the Christian narrative into one of the grand or master narratives which victimise otherness in view of its own purposes. Such reflections often have resulted in reintroducing negative theology as a necessary dynamic at work in all theologies.[2]

Thirdly, and closely related to the first and the second developments, the way theology deals with its truth claims is challenged by the awareness of religious plurality and the practices of interreligious communication. In Western contexts religious plurality and interreligious communication have become part of the common consciousness. Migration, tourism, media, world politics, etc., have brought religious plurality and the attempts to cope with religious dif-

1 See, e.g., P. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularisation of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); M. Hoelzl & G. Ward (eds.), *The New Visibility of Religion: Studies in Religion and Cultural Hermeneutics* (Continuum Resources in Religion and Political Culture) (London: Continuum, 2008).

2 See, e.g., K. Hart, "On Interruption," in J.D. Caputo, M. Dooley & M. Scanlon (eds.), *Questioning God*, (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 186–208.

ference onto our doorstep and into our living rooms. How then is one to think of one's own religious truth claims in relation to the claims of others? And how is one to assess the classic theological strategies of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism in this regard?[3]

At the same time, fourthly, the impact of globalisation on the world, of the economisation of its procedures, and of the mediatisation of its public space seem to foster large-scale tendencies towards uniformity. Plurality, difference, etc., become a function of larger processes and eventually are recuperated by the market, along with the rationalities which accompany it. In the long run this also affects the way Westerners deal with religion, as Vincent Miller has convincingly argued in his *Consuming Religion*.[4]

Fifthly, especially but not exclusively, for Roman Catholic theology, the event of Vatican II has foregrounded the internal plurality of the Roman Catholic Church and the legitimate aspirations of theologians worldwide to engage in contextual theologies. Of course, there is also the ongoing debate regarding the reception of Vatican II, which recently has gained more prominence, not only due to the lifting of the excommunication of four Lefebvrist bishops, but also in regard to the scholarly discussion of whether Vatican II should be conceived of in terms of (merely) continuity or as an innovation within the foregoing tradition.[5]

Lastly, in all of these developments, one might see a considerable polarisation at work. On the one hand, religious forces can vehemently oppose these developments, and in so doing posit their religious positions over against the context. On the other hand, the more frequent silent reactions dissolve religion into the context, including the various vague forms of religiosity and, what some would define as, a certain relativism. Indeed, this is a polarisation which then hardly leaves room for more nuanced positions to mediate between religion and context.

This short list of developments may indeed support a conclusion that a contemporary theological reflection on religious truth claims – and inasmuch as they have to do with the exercise we in this paper are engaged in, i.e., Christian truth claims – cannot but be related to the way in which the relationship between faith and context is conceived. Inasmuch as our context is marked by a growing plurality and different ways of coping with difference and otherness, the question of the truth of the other automatically impacts the question of one's own truth claims. In view of the current symposium, bringing together theologians from the East and the West, it would seem even more appropriate to address the challenge of plurality, and especially religious plurality, as one of the key points to be addressed. What I want to do in this contribution is to investigate what a Western theological approach, reflecting from its own context on these questions of truth, difference and plurality, would be able to contribute to the dialogue between the East and the West. Therefore, in the first part, I will sketch in a few lines the theological approach, which is the outcome of both my cultural-theological and philosophical-theological engagement with the contemporary Western context. In the second part, then, I will further develop how theological truth claims are both challenged and to be recontextualised by religious plurality and otherness.

3 For a comprehensive, paradigmatic survey see P.F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).

4 See V. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Religious Belief and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), and European reactions thereto in *Bulletin ET* 17 (2006) 1 (Special Issue: Consuming Religion in Europe).

5 Cf., e.g., J.A. Komonchak, "Benedict XVI and the Interpretation of Vatican II," in *Cr. St.* 28 (2007): 323–37.

4.1 A Contextual European Theology of Interruption

Both in my *Interrupting Tradition*, and in my more recent study *God Interrupts History*, I have attempted to develop the category of interruption for conceptualising the relationship between Christian faith and its present day context in a dynamic and productive way.[6] This has resulted in what one could call a "theology of interruption." I have made use of the category of interruption to elucidate how both on a cultural-contextual and theological level the Christian narrative is, at the same time, interrupted and interrupting, and this both on descriptive and normative accounts. Indeed, it is precisely the fact that our Christian tradition is culturally interrupted in Europe through the processes of detraditionalisation and pluralisation that opportunities become available for a rediscovery of the interruptive nature of Christianity, that is, its being continually interrupted by the

6 Cf. L. Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context* (Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, 30) (Leuven: Peeters / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Continuum, 2007). The current contribution draws substantially from this second book, esp. chapters 2, 8 and the conclusion.

God it bears witness to, and its being assigned by this divine interruption to interrupt on behalf of the same God.[7]

4.1.1 Continuity or Discontinuity between Faith and Context?

In order to do so I have critically engaged late modern correlation theologies (such as Edward Schillebeeckx' critical-productive interrelation between the Christian faith and the historical context[8]), because they too often start from the modern presumption that there is a fundamental continuity between Christian faith and the surrounding, European context. Through these developments, Christian theology profiled itself as a joint venture between the best of Christianity and the best of modernity with its critical-consciousness understood in terms of rationality and emancipation. In terms of our own reflections, it has proven to be very fruitful to bear in mind that these theologies were operative, immersed as they were, in a context in which the hermeneutical overlap between Christianity and culture was still functioning as an (often implicit) background presupposition. The theological presumption of continuity indeed rested upon this factual overlap. Detraditionalisation, however, has called the quasi-self-evident givenness of the Christian horizon of interpretation in Europe into question. Moreover, the still growing pluralisation of the European religious landscape leads to a heightened consciousness that the Christian horizon as such is no longer what Europeans have in common. Christianity progressively is to be located in the religious landscape as only one specific horizon (in its own diversity) in the midst of a dynamic manifold world of religions and other fundamental life options. In short, the continuity of the tradition and the overlap between the Christian horizon of meaning and the present day context have been interrupted on account of contextual shifts. At the same time, the postmodern suspicion of master narratives has raised questions concerning the generalization of conceptual patterns too easily starting off from, or resulting in, harmony, continuity and consensus. For, all too often, such patterns obfuscate the suppression of otherness and difference, and make conflicts and their victims invisible. In so far as modern theological methods of correlation live by these presuppositions, and function de facto on

7 For another account of this, see also my: "Religion after Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe," in *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 99–122.

8 Cf. e.g. E. Schillebeeckx, *Tussentijds verhaal over twee Jezusboeken* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1978) (English trans.: *Interim Report on the Books "Jesus" and "Christ,"* (London: SCM / New York: Crossroad, 1980)); *Mensen als verhaal van God* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1989) (English trans.: *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad / London: SCM, 1990)).

the basis of the aforesaid overlap between the Christian horizon and the context, they often suffer from a lack of distinctness and are ultimately even rendered counterproductive. In a detraditionalised and pluralised context, the search for continuity and consensus indeed often results in very general discourses, on the level of the lowest common denominator, and therefore at a growing distance from the specificity of the Christian tradition and its appeal.

At the same time, I have entered into discussion with anti-modern, rather neo-Augustinian contemporary approaches in theology, starting off from the presumption that a growing alienation of the context from Christian faith has occurred. In regard to these approaches, therefore, theology should take the discontinuity between Christian faith and the contemporary context as its point of departure. Some authors in this regard point out the contradictions in European modernity, based on the self-proclaimed autonomy of the human subject and its striving for emancipation, leading to individualism and libertinism. In opposition to today's developments, they plead for a rediscovery of the Christian roots of Europe in order to remedy the failures of the modern project, and to integrate again human subjectivity, rationality and a striving for freedom within a communal Christian horizon.[9] Others favour a genuine post-modern theology in the chronological sense of the term: a theology after modernity, a theology that leaves modernity behind, or at the very least its secular presuppositions. Such theologians read the postmodern crisis of modernity as the destruction of modernity, and therefore reject modern secular thinking and its ensuing postmodern nihilism. By way of remedy, they present conceptual schemes that claim a more original relationship with God as the point of departure for all reflection on humanity and the world.[10] From a theological-methodological perspective, these theological approaches are based on a presumption of discontinuity between faith and context, one which posits Christian faith and theology immediately

9 Cf. e.g. J. Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Crossroad, 2006). See also, in addition: J. Ratzinger, "Europe in the Crisis of Cultures," in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32 (2005): 345–56. For a comprehensive presentation of Joseph Ratzinger's position with respect to dialogue with the contemporary world, see my "Europe in Crisis. A Question of Belief or Unbelief? Perspectives from the Vatican," in *Modern Theology* 23 (2007): 205–27.

10 Cf. e.g. the Radical Orthodoxy movement, with as one of its most prominent representatives: J. Milbank, "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism': A Short Summa in Forty-Two Responses to Unasked Questions," in *Modern Theology* 7 (1991): 225–37; J. Milbank, C. Pickstock & G. Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999). For a critical theological engagement with these contemporary neo-Augustinianisms: L. Boeve, M. Lamberigts & M. Wisse), *Augustine and Postmodern Thought: A New Alliance against Modernity?* (BETL, 219) (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2009).

in opposition to the context. In this fashion, the context is to be overcome, or at least criticised and remedied.

It is my contention that neither the presupposition of continuity nor that of discontinuity is appropriate for the construction of a methodological theological reflection on the relationship between theology (or tradition, or faith) and the context. Recontextualising theology today, that is, attempting to reconfigure Christian theology in relation to the contemporary context, is not assisted by such thinking patterns.[11]

4.1.2 The Category of Interruption

It is for this reason that we must search for a fitting theological category that can support the methodological recontextualisation with regard to the precise relationship between Christian faith and present day culture. By way of response I propose the notion of "interruption." Whereas anti-correlationist (anti-modern) theologies strongly relativise or deny the intrinsic involvement of Christian faith and theology with the context and thus stress the discontinuity between both, and whereas modern correlational theologies presume a fundamental continuity between faith and context, a theological usage of the category of interruption rather holds continuity and discontinuity together in an albeit tense relationship. Interruption is, after all, not to be identified with rupture, because what is interrupted does not cease to exist. On the other hand, it also implies that what is interrupted does not simply continue as though nothing had happened. More specifically, and more technically, interruption signifies an intrusion that does not destroy the narrative but problematises the advance thereof. It disturbs the anticipated sequence of sentences following one after the other, and disarms the security devices that protect narratives against disruption. Interruption refers to that "moment," that "instance," that "event," which cannot occur without the narrative, and yet cannot be captured by the narrative. It involves the intrusion of an otherness that only momentarily but nonetheless intensely halts the narrative sequence.[12] Interruptions cause the narrative to collide with its own borders.

11 See – in relation to the reception of *Gaudium et spes* – also my "Beyond the Modern and Anti-modern Dilemma. *Gaudium et Spes* and Theological Method in a Postmodern European Context," in *Horizons* 34 (2007): 292–305.

12 These reflections on the category of interruption are inspired by J.-F. Lyotard's notion of the differend in, a.o.: *Le différend* (Paris: Minuit, 1983); *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants. Correspondance 1982–1985* (Paris: Galilée, 1986). For a theological engagement on Lyotard's thinking of difference; see my "Bearing Witness to the Differend. A Model for Theologizing in the Postmodern Context," in *Louvain Studies* 20 (1995): 362–79; "Critical Consciousness in the Postmodern Condition. A New Opportunity for Theology?," in *Philosophy and Theology* 10 (1997): 449–68.

They do not annihilate the narrative; rather they draw attention to its narrative character and force an opening towards the other within the narrative.

4.1.3 Interruption: Both Contextual and Theological

Moreover, the category of interruption is not only capable of structuring the mediation between tradition and context in a contextually adequate manner, but it is also a theologically legitimate way of doing so. In other words, from the perspective of recontextualisation, the contextual interruption of modern theology leads to a contextual theology of interruption.

It is indeed first of all a contextual interruption, which comes forth from the processes of detraditionalisation and pluralisation, both of which require Christian faith and theology to engage in recontextualisation. The moment of discontinuity accompanying interruption, however, does not necessarily lead to conceptual patterns that present the relationship between Christian faith and the contemporary context in oppositional terms or in terms of rupture. Christians may not be of the world, but they are nonetheless in the world. In this regard, the crisis of modern theology should not lead to the end of dialogue with the context, but rather to a revision of the nature of this dialogue, especially considering the altered relationship with the context. In contrast to the secularisation paradigm, detraditionalisation and pluralisation sharpen our awareness that to be Christian implies a more reflexive identity construction rooted in particular narratives and practices, with its own specific truth claim yet within a context of dynamic plurality and often-conflicting truth claims. A postmodern critical consciousness, moreover, warns us not to be too quick to include or exclude the truth of the other, but rather to reflect on our own truth claim in relationship to the truth claims of others. The contextual interruption of theology is not possible without the context; it happens where continuity and discontinuity between theology and context encounter one another.

In the midst of the dialogue with the present day context, however, "interruption" can be made productive not only as a contextual category but also as a theological category. As a matter of fact, interruption is capable of pointing to the way in which God reveals Godself in history and the way in which Christians bear witness to this reality in narratives and practices. God's interruption

constitutes the theological foundation for a continuous and radical hermeneutic of the context and the tradition. Just as (and because) every concrete encounter with the other/Other is a potential location for God to reveal Godself today, a *locus theologicus*, it is only in concrete narratives and practices that the interrupting God can be testified to in today's context.[13] Ultimately, it is the event of Jesus Christ narrated in this tradition that constitutes both the foundation and the hermeneutical key. Just as (and because) the Christian narrative is interrupted, the same narrative succeeds in bearing witness to the interruption without domesticating it. Furthermore, just as (and because) the Christian narrative is interrupted by God, Christians are called to interrupt themselves and others when their own narratives and those of others close themselves off. In this sense, 'interruption' is, first of all, not only a formal, methodological notion, but also a substantial theological category, narratively signified by the same tradition it interrupts. It is because interruption is such a thick theological category that it legitimates and motivates its formal and methodological use. Additionally, there are also political-theological considerations to be borne in mind, as wherever closed narratives are operative, victims are made. Whenever a narrative profiles itself as a meta-discourse, other narratives are either suppressed or excluded, invalidated or silenced. Where diversity and otherness are being stealthily reduced to the multiplicity of market goods or eradicated in the name of an inviolable hegemonic truth claim, Christians are obliged to interrupt on behalf of the God of the interrupted Christian narrative.

4.1.4 A Theology of Interruption: J. B. Metz Going Postmodern?

It was Johan Baptist Metz who once declared that "the shortest definition of religion is interruption."[14] By pronouncing this statement Metz wanted to make clear that Christian faith can never slip unpunished into a sort of bourgeois religion, seamlessly woven into the prevailing culture and society, nor withdraw

13 Among others in his *Einführung in die Gotteslehre* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2006), Hans-Joachim Sander develops the concept of "heterotopos" as *locus theologicus* (*alienus*), which – all things considered – runs remarkably parallel to the line of thought elaborated here. See also his contribution in the present volume.

14 Taken from: J.B. Metz, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald, 1977), p. 150, thesis vi; also mentioned in: *Unterbrechungen: Theologisch-politische Perspektiven und Profile* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Taschenbücher Siebenstern, 1981), p. 86. For Metz's theology, see further the collection of excerpts and articles by Metz that traces the evolution of his ideas: *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald, 1997).

itself from or against its context. Such a religion seeks a too facile reconciliation, forgetting the tragic suffering that confronts human existence. For Metz, there can be no Christian faith without tension or turmoil, without danger or menace. After all, Christians are bearers of the subversive, dangerous memory of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is why they actively seek out the boundaries of life and coexistence, moved as they are by the human histories of suffering that compel them towards a preferential option for the poor, the suffering and the oppressed. By its very nature, the Christian faith disrupts the histories of conqueror and vanquished alike, interrupting both the ideologies of the powerful and the powerlessness of the victims.[15]

The context in which we live thus opens a variety of paths towards the dangerous turbulence of interruption. For Metz, it is particularly the confrontation with suffering that forms the impetus behind his search for a "dangerous" theology of interruption. This confrontation compels him – in keeping with his late modern (neo-Marxist) dialogue partners (such as Adorno, Benjamin and Horkheimer) – towards developing a hermeneutics of suspicion that turns itself against those narratives that reconcile and too easily forget. Today, however, a second opportunity presents itself. Along with the cultural interruption of the Christian tradition, Christians also find themselves confronted with (religious) diversity and otherness.[16] In this instance, a theology of interruption tends rather to develop a hermeneutics of contingency, which aims to maintain the radical historical, specific and particular character of the Christian tradition without, however, closing itself in on it. Such a hermeneutics of contingency, when correctly understood, includes a hermeneutics of suspicion. Whoever chooses to engage in the current dialogue with the postmodern context cannot ignore this theological lesson from the recent past. Otherwise, the rediscovery of one's

15 For a detailed sketch and constructive critique of this theological position, see, for example, my "Postmoderne politieke theologie? Johann Baptist Metz in gesprek met het actuele kritische bewustzijn," in *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 39 (1999): 244–64.

16 Metz also alludes to this intuition in his later articles, after 1985, but does not really develop it further. See, for example, his "Unterwegs zu einer nachidealistischen Theologie," in J. Bauer (ed.), *Entwürfe der Theologie* (Graz: Styria, 1985), pp. 203–33; "In Aufbruch zu einer kulturell polyzentrischen Weltkirche," in F.-X. Kaufmann and J.B. Metz, *Zukunftsfähigkeit: Suchbewegungen im Christentum* (Freiburg: Herder, 1987), pp. 93–123; "Die eine Welt als Herausforderung an das westliche Christentum," in *Una Sancta* 44 (1989): 314–22; and his contributions to *Concilium* collected in: J.-B. Metz and J. Moltmann, *Faith and the Future. Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity* (Concilium Series) (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), pp. 30–7 (Theology in the Modern Age, and before Its End), pp. 57–65 (Unity and Diversity: Problems and Prospects for Inculturation), and pp. 66–71 (1492 – Through the Eyes of a European Theologian); and two contributions in *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie*, pp. 135–41 and 197–206.

own identity, and its boundaries in confrontation with the other, will be likely to fall once again into the facile closure of one's own narrative. The other then quickly becomes the forgotten one, the one who hastily becomes enclosed by or excluded from our narratives.

4.2 Theological Truth, Difference and Plurality: the Challenge of the Other's Truth Claim

A warning is perhaps necessary here. This short, more systematic account of a theology of interruption is itself an endpoint of a theological recontextualisation due to interruption. As a way to make the transition to the second part of our contribution I now turn to a particular interruptive event that has become paradigmatic for the theological approach I just shortly presented.[17]

Some years ago, during a morning radio show, a woman spoke of an encounter she had had the evening before. As part of a Church movement working for a multicultural society, she was invited by a Moroccan community in a suburb of Brussels to celebrate the "breaking of the fast" with them. The community in question had the practice of holding open house every evening of Ramadan at sundown. The woman recounted that the conversation at the table soon took on a profound sense of meaningfulness, certainly when religious themes such as the importance of "fasting" and the relationship between Muslims and Christians were being discussed. During the conversation, the woman was struck by the fact that certain similarities between Islam and Christianity, with respect to fasting for example, tended also to underline the differences between the two faiths. The encounter did not lead to a relativizing sentiment: "it all boils down to the same thing in the end." Rather, it led to a respectful recognition of difference and self-worth. The woman then went on to describe how the Christians present began to question themselves about the seriousness of their own faith: did they, for example, experience their own fasting as something authentic? Could they explain, for example, what it was about from their own lived experience? Should they not invest more in living up to the particulars of their own faith? And how could this then be done in a relevant and plausible way for today? She concluded that her meeting with the Muslim community was ultimately an unexpected wake-up call. Respect for the irreducible identity of one's own Christian narrative and for the otherness of different religions and other fundamental life options can thus go together. What is more, the encounter

17 Taken from Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, pp. 97–8.

made this woman reconsider her own identity and its importance precisely through this encounter with another religion. The experience of the woman in the radio interview can rightly be described as an experience of the productive interruption of one's own Christian narrative by the narrative of the other.

It is with such a paradigmatic experience of interruption in mind that we proceed now with the question regarding theological truth, difference and plurality.

Both concrete interreligious encounters and theoretical reflections on the effects of the truth claims of the religious other have necessitated a thoroughgoing recontextualisation of the way in which theological truth claims are to be conceived of and dealt with. In the remainder of the essay, and following the approach I presented in the first part, I will now shortly elaborate on the challenge put forward to theological truth claims by truth claims of the religious other: first I will look into the contextual interruptions of theology it may provoke, and afterwards I will investigate its theologically interruptive potential.

4.2.1 The Truth of the Other: Contextual Interruptions

The interruption proceeding, in the midst of religious plurality and interreligious communication, from the confrontation with religious difference, critically challenges Christianity's truth claims on two fronts. First, the Christian narrative is thrown back upon its own narrativity and particularity. Second, it must then also enquire as to how its own truth claims relate to the ones of others.

First of all, the confrontation with the truth claim of the religious other alerts the Christian narrative specifically to the very particularity of its own truth claims and the fact that these truth claims are firmly embedded in a way of life: religious truth concerns a truth one lives by, one immersed in orthopraxis. Religious truth is both given shape in, and by appealing to, concrete life forms, rituals, language, narratives, habits, gestures, sayings, and the ways religious individuals and communities deal with these. In this regard, because of the particular setting, what different religions would seem to have in common may well differentiate them fundamentally. For instance, the very elements that bind the three so-called prophetic religions – also referred to as "religions of the book" or "religions of revelation" – serve at the same time to distinguish them from one another. Islam, Christianity and Judaism differ considerably in their perception of the "prophet": Mohammed, Jesus or Moses respectively; in the role their sacred scriptures (Qur'an, Bible and Torah) play within the respective religious tradition; and the way in which the revelation of God in history is understood. Paying greater attention to the irreducible particularity of the Christian narrative

is then one of the lessons gleaned from the encounter with the plurality of religions and fundamental life options. The Christian narrative forms its own (albeit dynamic) symbolic space, its own hermeneutical horizon, or its own hermeneutical circle. Becoming acquainted with Christianity is thus something like learning a language, a complex event that presupposes grammar, vocabulary, competence and familiarity, as much as it does empathy. As a side remark, it should be mentioned that this growing consciousness within Christianity (and other religions) interrupts the often post-secular and post-Christian functionalisation of religiosity. Religious practices and narratives in such an instance are conceived of as little more than a filling in of the necessary religious dimension of being human, of the "*homo religiosus*." Belief then is often appreciated as a most effective therapy against loss of meaning and depression; its values are considered the driving force behind social integration and solidarity; its rituals deemed useful because answering the human need for ritualisation. From within the religious praxis, however, the truth religious people live by cannot be reduced to its anthropological function. In this regard, and rooted in the awareness of its own particularity, Christianity and other religions can also criticise and counter (i.e. interrupt) other creeping inclinations to uniformity, such as the processes of economic globalisation, in which plurality and otherness are recuperated in terms of market perspectives, rendering diversity marketable, consumable, and exchangeable.

At the same time, and in immediate connection to this first point – i.e. the heightened recognition of the very narrativity and particularity of Christianity – the confrontation with the truth claim of the religious other interrupts any easy universalisation of Christian truth claims or pretences towards absoluteness. The postmodern contextual critical consciousness, gained from the confrontation with plurality and difference, informs the Christian narrative of its particular borders and criticises the tendency, inherent in every narrative (thus also in the Christian narrative), to secure one's own identity above or against other identities. The modern-theological manoeuvre, for example, to link the Christian narrative, and thus its truth claim, with a secular meta-discourse (e.g. a transcendental anthropology), has not only become unreliable but has also proved counter-productive. Both the truth claims of Christianity and of the other are linked to a universalising framework, one which not only undoes religions of their irreducible embeddedness in particularity, but also reduces the interruptive impact of the claims of otherness differentiating these truth claims. At the same time, post-secular forms of Christian neo-traditionalism and fundamentalism tend to harden and absolutise their religious truth claims to such a degree that, also in their case, the very interruption of otherness caused by the confrontation with irreducible religious plurality, is no longer perceived, or is perceived only as a threat.

This contextual interruption is obviously of importance for the discussion regarding the variety of Christian theologies of religions, or theological engagements of inter-religious communication. Any attempt to denote religious plurality by way of a meta-discourse and to transcend the conflict of truth claims by way of a universal epistemological framework does not take the radicality of these truth claims seriously. Such an epistemological observer's perspective is and remains totalising; the confrontation with the other, and with difference, is ultimately done away with. This is why, from a structural point of view, classical exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist solutions in fact run parallel to each other. They all demarcate a single framework – which is also, in principle, no less particular than any other – as a meta-discourse on the basis of which all other narratives are perceived. In the first instance – with respect to exclusivism and inclusivism – Christianity is universalised: the Christian faith is the one and only truth, for all times and places and peoples. It is thus from the perspective of this truth that Christians perceive other religions as either completely lacking in truth or sharing only in a part thereof. In the second instance – with respect to pluralism – Christianity is particularised: the Christian faith is (only) one perspective on, or part of, a greater truth. It is one specific (particular) truth that is contained in or surpassed by a higher (universal) truth.[18] This also explains the way in which the three strategies in question evaluate "incarnation": for exclusivism and inclusivism, incarnation is the cornerstone of the truth claim that universalises Christian particularity: the human Jesus becomes the vessel of a universal, all-embracing divine truth. For the same reason, by contrast, incarnation is the stumbling block par excellence for pluralism. Precisely because the dogma of the incarnation universalises the historical-particular Christian truth claim, thus making it totalitarian, and rendering a respectful approach to other religions as an impossibility. It is only when the fullness of truth is not identified with the Christian faith that it becomes possible for other religions to claim the truth (however partial). In sum, the truth in both instances is not to be found in the specific particularity of the Christian faith but rather in either a universalised Christian faith or a universal religion, of which a particular Chris-

18 For a philosophical-theological elaboration of this dynamic of universalisation and particularisation, see my "The Particularity of Religious Truth Claims. How to Deal with it in a So-called Postmodern Context," in K. De Troyer & C. Helmer (eds.), *Truth: Interdisciplinary Dialogues for a Pluralist Age* (Studies in Philosophical Theology, 22) (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2003), pp. 181–95.

tianity is but one single form. If truth exists, then it does so in spite of particularity.

In light of the interruptive event of the truth of the religious other it is no longer appropriate to conceive of religious truth – and definitely including Christian theological truth claims – in general universal terms or universalised religious patterns to which concrete religious traditions are related insofar as they are particular, contingent and historical instances thereof. However, and at this point, the contextual interruption might serve to open up a perspective of theological interruption: is it not possible – especially from a Christian-theological viewpoint of incarnation – to hold to the opposite, namely by insisting that, if truth exists, it is to be found in the concrete, the historical and the particular? Is this not the ultimate meaning of incarnation: that the "all-too-human" speaks for God, without diminishing God in the process and without assimilating humanity into God? In three steps we will now continue our line of thought further, and develop how contextual interruption is also in this case the driving force towards a theological recontextualisation in which interruption may become a theological category.

4.2.2 Engaging the Truth of the Other: a Participant's Perspective Leads to Another Kind of Inclusivism

In view of the double contextual interruption of Christian theological truth claims, holding to an epistemological observer's perspective in the discussion of religious truth claims seems to be untenable with respect to both the postmodern criticism of difference and the self-consciousness brought about by interreligious communication. A discussion between Christians and Buddhists on the topic of mysticism and contemplation, one suspects, would reveal significant points of agreement. At the same time, however, it also attests to the difference between both. It truly makes a difference if one contemplates the mystery of reality as "love" or as "emptiness."[19] For the Christian believer, the ultimate truth of reality was definitively revealed in Jesus Christ as the mystery of love. Living one's life according to this reality makes one a Christian and ultimately serves as the measure of one's Christianity. It also forms the background and interpretative key of the way in which Christians engage in their contact with others. For Christians, indeed, the recognition of goodness and truth in other religions takes

19 See e.g. the biographical reflections of J.-M. Verlinde in *L'expérience interdite* (Versailles: Editions Saint-Paul, 1998), chapter 9.

place of necessity in reference to Jesus Christ, precisely because they engage in contact with others as Christians. Inclusivism, in one way or another, thus seems to be inescapable – Christianity will continue to constitute the hermeneutical circle from within which Christians operate.

Such a theological-hermeneutical consciousness, however, should not again turn into an inclusivism that falls pray to the totalising and universalising tendencies we noted above. Indeed, interreligious communication teaches us in practice that there is no neutral place or neutral language from which to speak about the multiplicity of religions, and that the Christian discourse also consists of a highly specific grammar and vocabulary rooted in its own background and traditions. There is no such thing as a religious Esperanto into which every religion can be translated. We have no standard religious language, neither philosophical nor anthropological, at our disposal that allows us to make the uniqueness of every religion – as it is sensed by their faithful from within – transparent and understandable to all. We do not possess a conceptual framework in which a sort of unified religion can be designated or constructed and of which the various religions of the world are concrete representations. Christians engage in dialogue with people of other beliefs and other fundamental life options. All are participants who bring their own background and horizon alongside with other participants.

As a matter of fact, interreligious dialogue itself confronts inclusivist theologians with their own particular points of departure and makes them aware that they participate in such a communication from a Christian perspective. Christians are already located, that is, have already adopted a position, in the plural domain of interreligious communication, and it is from this position, in the midst of other positions, that they should assess their necessarily inclusivist dealings with others. Christians do not have a bird's eye view that allows them to survey religious plurality as detached observers and grant it a place in light of its own truth. Indeed, Christianity's own place in the midst of plurality is part of the picture. Such a "different inclusivism" to which we here refer is conscious of the particularity of the Christian faith and brings it into the larger dialogue, not in order to relativise its own position but rather to determine it in the plural, interreligious world. In the context of interreligious contacts and communications, Christians will ultimately be confronted with their own specific way of speaking about reality. Unable to distance themselves from their particular options, presuppositions, terminology and conceptual schemes, Christians ultimately approach others with their own "baggage." An example thereof is the universal salvific will of God, which explains why Christians tend to be so highly motivated in their engagement in interreligious dialogue.

Perhaps here an image could best explain what we mean. Some pluralists present the various religions as a variety of different paths that lead to the same mountaintop engulfed in clouds. Yet, how can we verify such a hypothesis, if we only follow one of the said paths, namely the Christian one? Without a bird's eye perspective on the religious reality it is impossible to legitimate the image. There's the rub! Only from a "helicopter" perspective could one be sure that all paths lead to the same top. A further elaboration of this image therefore leads to the opposite conclusion. The experiences of religious plurality and interreligious dialogue reveal that the observer's position is in fact unsustainable. We are all participants. We all follow our own path. We are only aware that other paths exist that cross our own from time to time or run parallel with our path for a while only to go off in their own direction. Walking on our own path, however, it is impossible for us to confirm that all these paths actually lead to the same mountaintop. Indeed, it is equally possible that one or other paths, which disappears beyond the horizon and into the clouds, might lead to a different mountaintop. It is impossible to confirm this from the perspective of our own path and likewise impossible to deny it. We simply do not know. Nevertheless, we climb the mountain using our own path and from time to time other paths cross our own. It is thus from our own experiences as mountain climbers that we enter into dialogue and that we are able to exchange thoughts and customs, joys and concerns with others, all the while being rooted in our experience of the journey. In this fashion, a particular role is set aside in this endeavour for the imagination. Aware of the fact that we are participants, and because learning about the other informs our contact with the other, we are capable, to a degree, of changing our perspective without however revoking the irreducible otherness of the other in the process.

An inclusivist perspective is thus – epistemologically speaking – unavoidable. Nevertheless, the question posed by pluralist theologians with respect to the relationship between Christian truth claims and other religions remains a pressing one: how do we couple an explicit Christian identity to a fundamental respect for other religions? The practice of interreligious dialogue would appear to show that there is room for both, but how can we conceptualise this reality in theological terms? Is a sort of "pluralist" inclusivism conceivable? In contrast to the classical inclusivist position, this would at least imply that Christians approach religious plurality from the perspective of participants. For us as Christians, the mystery of Christ constitutes the perspective from which we speak about religious salvation and truth, because we live in and from this truth. Though the universal salvific will of God, which is revealed to us in Christ, provides the Christian point of cross-reference that inspires us to seek traces of goodness

and truth in other religions, we can only follow one path at a time – trusting that all humanity is ultimately saved in Christ.

4.2.3 The Theological Interruption of Incarnation

In line with a contextual critical consciousness, the confrontation with the truth of the other interrupts the Christian narrative at the point at which it tends to close itself off. Engaged in ongoing processes of recontextualisation, today's theologies cannot avoid dealing with this interruption. Recontextualisation, however, can never be legitimate on merely contextual grounds; at the same time it also requires a theological legitimisation. Only when interruption becomes a theological category as well can the Christian narrative allow itself to be interrupted and become a narrative of interruption. As a theological category, then, interruption structures the way in which we reflect upon the relationship wherein God is engaged with God's creation. It is at this point that we must continue our reflection on incarnation.

We noted already above that "incarnation" might signify more than the idea that theological truth is revealed in the particular, or, in other words, that the particular is the vessel of the universal. The interruptive event of the incarnation indicates, rather, that the particular is constitutive of the truth, essential and indispensable. Truth is real, concrete, incarnate, and can only be grasped as such. This means that when we speak of Jesus Christ, God's Son made flesh, we cannot simply make a clear distinction between the divinity and humanity of Jesus. God's revelation is unthinkable without the human Jesus; the human Jesus is constitutive of what we know of Jesus as Christ, and of Christian faith in him. It is in Jesus, in his concrete humanity, that God is revealed among human beings as the Jew from Nazareth who proclaimed the Kingdom of God in the language and narratives of his own day and put it into practice until he died on the Cross outside Jerusalem. It is this same Jesus whom his disciples confessed after his death that he had risen, that he was the Christ, God's Son, in his humanity and not in spite of it. Therefore, the one who desires to know God must look at Jesus. The first disciples expressed the results of their faith-inspired recognition of Jesus in the New Testament, in the language and stories of their day – in the same way as the faith communities that followed them have been doing, inspired time after time by these words. It is this interruptive event which has become the locus where God has made, and continues to make, Godself fully "known."

Moreover, Jesus Christ reveals God and God's desire for human beings thanks to his humanity. Classical theology tends to explain this point in "soter-

iological" terms, from the perspective of "he descended from heaven for our salvation." Only if God has really become human, it is proposed, can the human person really become God; it is only because God shared humanity to the full with us that we human beings are saved. At this juncture, we would rather emphasise the epistemological perspective, so that the question runs: what does it say about the truth unfolded in Christ? As we have already stated: the person who desires to know God must look to Jesus Christ who, as a human person, definitively revealed God in history. At the same time, divine truth for Christians is also to be located in concrete events and narratives. It is only in the all-too-historical, the concrete, the accidental, that God can become manifest, that God becomes manifest. This does not mean that God coincides with the concrete and the accidental, but that the concrete and the accidental make the manifestation of God possible, not in spite of but rather thanks to the concrete and the accidental. Every concrete encounter, no matter how accidental, every particular and contingent event, is the potential locus of God's manifestation. For Christians, God's revelation in Jesus Christ forms the hermeneutical key in this regard.

This is what the Christological dogma of the Council of Chalcedon[20] – Jesus Christ is at the same time both God and human – can mean for us today: God is revealed in Jesus Christ, not without Jesus' humanity but in and through it; as a human person, Jesus reveals God without thereby giving up his humanity. Historically situated in a very specific context, Jesus' concrete words and deeds reveal God. Also today, every current statement about this God and this revelation must comply with the same rules. Even today, it is only possible to give expression to God's involvement in history and the world in all-too-human terms. Jesus' particular humanity, concrete history and events, Christian narratives and interpretative frameworks, do not represent a stumbling block on our journey to God, they represent the very possibility of the journey.

What we have just said is in fact true of every human engagement with the Christian faith, and thus informs the very hermeneutical nature of the Christian tradition, the Christian way of life, and Christian truth claims. It is only in the particular word, narrative, ritual and practice that the profound significance of the Christian faith can be revealed. Incarnation thus demands an ongoing 'radical hermeneutics' in which the particular as the possibility of divine revelation is taken seriously and, at the same time, relativised, since the particular never coincides with God, just as God and humanity are united in a single person, undivided and undiluted.[21] This is the core around which the Christian tradition turns: the latter cannot be substituted nor can it be absolutised. It speaks of God – and without it there can be no talk about God – but it is not God. Where tradition is absolutised, it is precisely Godself who interrupts such self-enclosing rigidity and fosters recontextualisation. It follows, therefore, that there is no such thing as a core of truths that can be distinguished as such from every form of mediation, or that there is an unchangingly given expression in ever changing historical frameworks, as many classical hermeneutic (and less hermeneutic) theologians have argued. On the contrary, theological truth is co-constituted by the all-too-human, that is, by concrete history and its context. This does not do an injustice to such truths, since it is only thus, through time and history, that we can speak about God. Likewise, it is through this tradition that God speaks to Christians today, as embedded in the current historical context and whereby this tradition both perpetuates and renews itself.

20 See for this paragraph also my "Christus Postmodernus: an Attempt at Apophatic Christology," in T. Merrigan & J. Haers (eds), *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology* (BETL, 152) (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2000), pp. 577–93.

4.2.4 The Truth of the Other as a "*locus theologicus*"

It thus follows that a fully accepted particularity of the Christian discourse is not a refutation of its truth, but rather the very precondition thereof, just as it is only through the incarnation that God becomes fully revealed. This implies at the same time that each Christian narrative stands under God's judgement and can only bear witness to God in a radical-hermeneutical manner. For this reason, a Christian narrative may not close itself on theological grounds. From a theological-epistemological point of view, the encounter with the other, and also the religious other and his or her truth claims, is in fact the place in which God's interruption can be revealed and where the borders of one's own Christian narrative in naming this God can become visible. The "peculiarity" of the Chris-

21 It is important at this juncture that we resolutely distance ourselves from other forms of so-called radical-hermeneutical theologies, which – à la J. Caputo and others – endeavour to designate the truth moment of Christian faith as beyond all particularity in a deconstructionist, negative theological movement, with the consequent reduction of particularity. It is only in the all too particular that God is revealed and this revelation cannot be dissociated from the said particularity in any way. Apophasis does not imply the reduction to nothing of *kataphasis* but rather a radical-hermeneutical qualification thereof. See further my "The Rediscovery of Negative Theology Today: The Narrow Gulf between Theology and Philosophy," in M. Olivetti (ed.), *Théologie négative* (Biblioteca dell' "Archivio di Filosofia", 59) (Rome: CEDAM, 2002), pp. 443–59, and especially my "God, Particularity and Hermeneutics. A Critical-Constructive Theological Dialogue with Richard Kearney on Continental Philosophy's Turn (in)to Religion," in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 81 (2005): 305–33.

tian truth claim, therefore, is that Christians cannot claim the truth, and yet they are always already living in relation to it, in respect to the radical-hermeneutical tension of a narrative that both concerns God and is interrupted by God.

That is why present day interreligious communication is not only a contextual necessity but also a theological one. Precisely the confrontation with the truth of the other may well be the place where God reveals Godself today. Indeed, would it be going too far to interpret the paradigmatic interruptive event with which I began this reflection in this way? Is the recognition by the Christian woman of both the specificity of fasting practices and the need to take more seriously one's own fasting practices, not at the same time a revelatory event, manifesting God in the every day concreteness of encounters and praxis?

Such hermeneutical-theological acknowledgement also goes here hand in hand with political-theological consequences, and invites a praxis of mutual recognition, for it might well be God who is met in the religiously other – especially where this other is also the poor, the outcast, the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoner, the naked, in short, in the vulnerable and wounded other: "'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?' [...] 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'" (Mt 25:37b-40b). In the case of the paradigmatic narrative we started this section with, the political-theological aspects illustrated actually bring to the fore the unhealthy connection between Islam, migration, and the rise of the extreme right in Western Europe. Such a connection is burdened with a manifold of cultural, religious, social, economical and political struggles and exclusions, and the inability to come to the construction of identities which are capable of not only respecting otherness, but also of critical-constructively engaging with it.

4.3 By Way of Conclusion

So far the Word and the Spirit, the main theme of this encounter between East and West, have not been mentioned. In this contribution it was the status of theological truth, challenged by the truth claim of the other, which was at stake. Of course, the prominence of incarnation to think theological truth both contextually and theologically, and the recourse to Chalcedon to sustain this point, are not without reference to the Word. Apart from this, however, two more remarks can be made. First, from the ideas developed above, it follows that in the discussion regarding the variety of theologies of religions, the Word and the Spirit cannot be pitted against each other. Yet this happens, for example, in pluralist thinking strategies which confine the Word to the Christian tradition

and see the Spirit at work in the other religions. So doing, they consciously relativise Christian faith to (only) one particular instance of a much broader and varied set of revelations within the economy of salvation. The Word and the Spirit, however, cannot be divorced from each other, but are connected in the way God makes history concrete: the Spirit remains the Spirit of Christ, and as the Spirit of Christ it fosters the Christological reading key within the radical and political-theological hermeneutics that are called for. The latter, then, constitutes the second concluding remark we would like to make. Word and Spirit are indeed mutually active in the process of continuous recontextualisation of the Christian narrative, that is, of the (un)interrupted theological hermeneutics of history. However, it would be too easy to simply identify narrative with Word and the interruptive event as Spirit, with the Word then standing for stability and sameness, and the Spirit, as an experience of newness and otherness, being the sole active agent in the further development of tradition. For inasmuch as interruption is not to be equated with rupture, the Christian narrative is constitutive for the interruptive event, introducing a continuous dynamic tension between the (particular) word and the Word the latter incarnates, preventing the tradition from closing in on itself. It is then in the Spirit, as it assists the faithful to receive and interpret this tension between word and Word, in which both narrative and interruptive event ultimately are kept together: the narrative being opened up by the event, and the event borne witness to by the interrupted narrative. It is here also that Word and Spirit are not to be pitted against one another; rather they constitute together the very dynamics of God's involvement in history and the way the faithful read this involvement.